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The Object of History

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The Object of History

The phrase 'the object of history' may mean all sorts of things. In this article, a distinction is made between object1, the object of study for historians, and object2, the goal or purpose of the study of history. Within object2, a distinction is made between a goal intrinsic to the study of history (object2in) and an extrinsic goal (object2ex), the latter being what the study of history should contribute to society (or anything else outside itself). The main point of the article, which is illustrated by a discussion of the work of R. G. Collingwood, E. H. Carr, and G. R. Elton, is that in the work of historians and philosophers of history, these kinds of 'object of history' are usually (closely) connected. If they are not, something is wrong. That does not mean, however, that historians or even philosophers of history are always aware of these connections. For that reason, the distinctions

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Abstract

The phrase ‘the object of history’ may mean all sorts of things. In this article, a distinction is made between object₁, the object of study for historians, and object₂, the goal or purpose of the study of history. Within object₂, a distinction is made between a goal intrinsic to the study of history (object_{2in}) and an extrinsic goal (object_{2ex}), the latter being what the study of history should contribute to society (or anything else outside itself). The main point of the article, which is illustrated by a discussion of the work of R. G. Collingwood, E. H. Carr, and G. R. Elton, is that in the work of historians and philosophers of history, these kinds of ‘object of history’ are usually (closely) connected. If they are not, something is wrong. That does not mean, however, that historians or even philosophers of history are always aware of these connections. For that reason, the distinctions made in this article provide a useful analytical tool for historians and theorists of history alike.

1. Introduction

The meaning of the phrase ‘the object of history’ is not self-evident. There are two obvious reasons for this: firstly, the terms ‘object’ and ‘history’ may both be used in a number of ways, and secondly, if the way in which they are used is explicated, the terms may still be endowed with several meanings. The term ‘history’, for instance, may be used to refer to the past or the historical process, to the study (in particular the scientific study) of history, or to written history or the practice of writing history. Once it is explicated that the term is used to denote the study of history, it is by no means clear what exact meaning this carries for the person in question. We still do not know what is meant by ‘the study of history’ – what it is supposed to involve – partly because the meaning of ‘the study of history’ is dependent on that of ‘history’ in the sense of the past, or the historical process.

In this article, I will be concerned with two senses of the phrase ‘the object of history’: 1) *the object of study of the historical science* – I say ‘the historical science’ here to avoid speaking of ‘the object of study of the study of history’; 2) *the aim or goal of the study of history*.¹ Hence, for the purpose of this article, I take ‘history’ in the phrase ‘the object of history’ to mean ‘the study of history’ (or ‘the historical science’, ‘the science of history’), and I distinguish between two senses of ‘object’: object as that which the historian studies, and object as goal (or aim, or purpose).² The point made in this article is that *these two kinds of ‘object of history’ tend to be connected* in historical writing, and in the philosophy of history.³ Writers who take a certain view of the object of study for historians (object₁), will have a view of the aim of the study of history (object₂) that somehow corresponds to that. The same goes the other way around. Some historians or philosophers of history may start out (more) at the one end, and move from there to the other, while some may move from the other end, in the opposite direction. An historian who takes object₁ to be ‘historical

facts', for instance, is more likely to view object₂ as 'the adequate description of the past' than an historian who holds object₁ to be 'events' or 'processes'. The latter historian will more readily think of object₂ along the lines of 'understanding the connections between events', or perhaps 'explaining certain developments and occurrences'. This is a simplification of course, but it serves to clarify the basic principle.

Object₁ can be taken quite concretely as the object under study in one particular research project, or more abstractly, as the final object of study to which all historical research pertains (e.g. past actions, or past events). It is the latter sense in which I speak of object₁ in this article. Finally, a distinction has to be made between two kinds of object₂. We may call them the first-order goal and the second-order goal of the study of history. The first-order goal tends to be most closely connected to object₁. The above examples of objects₂ are examples of first-order goals. These goals are *intrinsic* to the study of history. Second-order goals are primarily connected to first-order goals, and via them, so indirectly, to objects₁. A second-order goal might be: to help people make political decisions, by informing them of the antecedents of existing situations. Second-order goals are *extrinsic* to the study of history. Hence, we may speak of object_{2in} and object_{2ex}.⁴

In the following sections, I will illustrate how, in the work of a small number of historians and philosophers of history, object₁ is related to object₂, and how within object₂ object_{2in} is in turn connected to object_{2ex}. This will entail a close reading of these texts, for which it will be necessary to let them 'speak for themselves' somewhat more than one would ordinarily do. We will see that it is the *contents* of the different types of object that differs between authors, rather than the nature of the relations between them. The relation between object₁ and object_{2in} is always of such a kind that the latter entails doing something with the former. That is, object_{2in} might be to understand object₁, to explain object₁, and so on. The connection between object_{2in} and object_{2ex} is of another nature. The former is a precondition of the latter; the intrinsic goal allows and disallows certain extrinsic goals. But the extrinsic goal may be primary in the mind of an historian, and object_{2in} may then be formulated with a view to object_{2ex}. Below, I will start out with a section on Collingwood. This will be followed by a section on (the debate between) Carr and Elton; then, I will briefly discuss the relation between the various kinds of object of history and their subject (by which I mean the historian), after which I will end with an evaluation of what is or can be gained by making the distinctions between various 'objects of history' the way I do.

2. R. G. Collingwood on 'the object of history'

Collingwood hardly needs an introduction, I suppose. He was an historian, archaeologist, and philosopher. His best-known works in that last capacity include *The Principles of Art*, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, and *The Idea of History*, which is a posthumously published part of a project that was originally intended to culminate in *The Principles of History*. It is *The Idea of History* in which we find Collingwood's views on 'the object of history'.⁵ As one author remarks, "his account of the character of the object of history is less frequently discussed [than his account of historical knowledge]".⁶ Although my purpose here is to use Collingwood's work as an illustration of the connection between object₁ and object₂ in the work of historians and philosophers of history, it is a welcome bonus that doing so will also help (if only a little) to fill in

a perceived gap in the discussion of Collingwood's work.

The second section of the introduction of *The Idea of History* is devoted to 'History's Nature, Object, Method, and Value'. It is here that we find Collingwood's first (well-known) statement of 'the object of history' – the relevant paragraph bears this name. He takes the question as to the object of history to mean: "What kind of things does history find out?" (By 'history' he obviously means the study of history.)

"I answer, *res gestae*: actions of human beings that have been done in the past. (...) [H]istory is the science of *res gestae*..."⁷

At first sight, it seems that this statement of object₁ could not be clearer. But this is, indeed, only at first sight. One page further, Collingwood asks: "*what is history for?*" His answer is again quite resolute:

"[H]istory is 'for' human self-knowledge. (...) Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is."⁸

So here is a first statement of object₂, and one that immediately shows the connection between object₁ and object₂. But to come to a real understanding of this connection, we have to look, first, at Collingwood's elaboration of object₁, and subsequently at his idea of progress as created by historical thinking.

In the course of *The Idea of History*, it becomes clear that Collingwood's statement that the study of history is concerned with *res gestae* does not speak for itself. He distinguishes between *history* and *nature*. Both have a processual character, but the basic components of the natural process are *events*, whereas those of the historical process are *actions*. What distinguishes actions from events is that the latter have only an *outside*, whereas the former also have an *inside*. "[A]n action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event."⁹ With the outside of an event, Collingwood means "everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements". The inside of an event is "that in it which can only be described in terms of thought".¹⁰ The combination of Collingwood's first statement of object₁ and this conception of actions leads to the conclusion that

"all history is the history of thought. In so far as human actions are mere events, the historian cannot understand them; strictly, he cannot even ascertain that they have happened. They are only knowable to him as the outward expression of inward thoughts."¹¹

This has important implications for the historian's method. It is the task of the historian to use his knowledge of the outside of events (that are actions) to penetrate to the inside, so that he can recreate in his own mind the thought of historical agents:

"[H]ow does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is

only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind. The historian of philosophy, reading Plato, is trying to know what Plato thought when he expressed himself in certain words. The only way in which he can do this is by thinking it for himself. This, in fact, is what we mean when we speak of ‘understanding’ the words. (...) The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind.”¹²

Object₁, then, is amended in such a way that Collingwood can say that “at bottom, [the historian] is concerned with thoughts alone”.¹³ The historian method is to use the outward expression of past thoughts to rethink them in her/his own mind. To do so, to re-enact past experience in his own mind, so as to discover what historical agents thought, can be said to be the intrinsic goal of the study of history. History ‘teaches us what man has done’, Collingwood wrote, but what man has done is nothing else, essentially, than what man has thought; it is this that distinguishes action from ‘mere’ events. So object₁ is past thought, and object_{2in}, closely connected to this, is to discover past thought by rethinking it. As a corollary of this, a (preliminary) extrinsic goal of the study of history is to come to know ‘what man is’. Even if for Collingwood, ‘to know what man has done’ and ‘to know what man is’, are two statements of substantially the same thing, (which is doubtful), they are logically not the same – that is, the phrases have intensionality: even if they refer to the same knowledge, the meaning of each phrase is different.¹⁴ Hence, I do not take coming to know what man is as an intrinsic goal of the study of history, but as a (preliminary) extrinsic goal, that connects object_{2in} with the primary object_{2ex}.

It is time to consider the latter, which is best done by looking at Collingwood’s idea of progress. Collingwood rejects the idea of a ‘law of progress’, according to which history inevitably progresses in a fashion similar to the way nature was by many in the nineteenth century supposed to progress. He then asks what a sensible meaning of the phrase ‘historical progress’ might be.¹⁵ He suggests that “the idea of historical progress (...), if it refers to anything, refers to the coming into existence not merely of new actions or thoughts or situations belonging to the same specific type, but of new specific types.”¹⁶ These novelties need also to be regarded as improvements. But improvements are always improvements from a certain point of view.¹⁷ What is needed is a comparison between the two historical phases, the one before the novelty, and the one after its coming into existence. People are rarely able to make a true comparison of this kind, and tend to perceive what they do not know (either what went before, or the new) as bad in comparison to what they know. What is needed, then, is to have real knowledge of both historical phases, of what life was or is like in both. What is needed is *historical knowledge*:

“[T]he revolutionary can only regard his revolution as a progress in so far as he is also an historian, genuinely re-enacting in his own historical thought the life he nevertheless rejects.”¹⁸

Historical knowledge is necessary to be able to judge whether progress has been made or not. But when an historian asks whether a certain change was progress, “what exactly is he asking?”

“There is only one genuine meaning for this question. If thought in its first phase, after solving the initial problems of that phase, is then, through solving these, brought up

against others which defeat it; and if the second solves these further problems without losing its hold on the solution of the first, so that there is gain without any corresponding loss, then there is progress.”¹⁹

This way, there can be moral progress, economic progress, philosophical progress, and so on.²⁰

“In such senses and in such cases as these, progress is possible. Whether it has actually occurred, and where and when and in what ways, are questions for historical thought to answer. But there is one other thing for historical thought to do: namely to create this progress itself. For progress is not a mere fact to be discovered by historical thinking: it is only through historical thinking that it comes about at all.”²¹

Here we have ended up with Collingwood’s statement of the (primary) extrinsic goal of the study of history. Object_{2ex} is to bring about progress. The reason why it can only be brought about by historical knowledge is that for progress we need historical knowledge, human self-knowledge, “the retention in the mind, at one phase, of what was achieved in the preceding phase”.²² To bring about something better than what exists, we need to understand what exists, and retain this understanding, “as a knowledge of the past conditioning our creation of the future”.²³

Now that we know how to understand object₁, object_{2in}, and object_{2ex} in Collingwood’s work, the connections between them ought also to be clear. Object₁ is past thought; the intrinsic goal of the study of history is to come to know and understand past thought. This comes down to gaining self-knowledge, knowledge of man. It is only through the attainment and retainment of self-knowledge that we can achieve progress, which is to find (more) adequate solutions for our (new) problems without forgetting past (adequate) solutions. Thus, I hope to have illuminated very briefly some aspects of the connections that Helgeby devoted his book to: those between the object of history, the theory of historical knowledge, and the “moral and civilising importance of historical practices”.²⁴

3. E. H. Carr and G. R. Elton on ‘the object of history’

E. H. Carr is well-known for his popular *What is History?*²⁵ In this collection of lectures, Carr discusses (among others) questions as to the relations between the historian and his facts, between (the study of) history and society, and between history and other disciplines, and of course the question which gave the collection its title. In dealing with these matters, he makes a number of clear statements regarding the object of history, in all senses relevant to this article. *What is History?* is a collection of work in the philosophy of history, both speculative and critical – or, as some authors would rather have it, in the philosophy of history and the philosophy of historiography.²⁶ But Carr was also (and foremost) an historian. His reflections on ‘the object of history, then, are informed by his own experience as an historian.

The same goes for G. R. Elton, although he is the more practically-minded of the two, more ‘your typical historian’, if I may be so bold – which does not mean, by the way, that he is wary of making bold philosophical statements; the contrary is true, as we shall see. Elton’s *The Practice of History* was very much written in opposition to Carr. This makes it all the more interesting to look at his ideas on ‘the object of history’ (again, in its various senses relevant to this article). In so far

as Carr's and Elton's views contrast, what they deem to be the object(s) of history will show itself more clearly; in so far as they converge, it will force us to look for the subtle differences, and their implications for the connection between object₁, object_{2in}, and object_{2ex}. To get at the connection between the different kinds of object of history is the primary goal of this exercise, but I believe the comparison between Carr and Elton is interesting in itself, as it shows us where exactly the important differences lie between these 'rivals', and where they do not lie – contrary to what they may themselves believe. So, as a secondary goal, this section illuminates a small fragment of the recent history of British historical theory and historiography.

3.1. E. H. Carr on 'the object of history'

Carr's view of what history (as a science) is depends very much on his view of the historical process. The first answer he gives to the question 'What is history?' already highlights this connection:

"My first answer (...) to the question 'What is history?' is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past."²⁷

The study of history is itself situated at a particular point in the historical process. This cannot but show itself in the history that is written at that time and place. The historian is part of society, and part of the historical 'procession', in which he is 'just another dim figure trudging along'. "The point in the procession at which he finds himself determines his angle of vision over the past."²⁸

So the historian studies the past, from his particular vantage point in the historical process(ion). But we want to know what the historian studies much more precisely than this. In his lecture "History, Science, and Morality", Carr remarks that "[i]t is scarcely necessary today to argue that the historian is not required to pass moral judgements on the private life of the characters in his story", which is why a lot of 'facts' about people are not of interest to the historian: "Pasteur and Einstein were, one is told, men of exemplary, even saintly, private lives. But, suppose they had been unfaithful husbands, cruel fathers, and unscrupulous colleagues, would their historical achievements have been any the less? And it is these which preoccupy the historian."²⁹ So the historical achievements of people are part of what the historian studies, but people's private lives and their character are only part of object₁ in so far as they 'affected historical events'.³⁰

The object of history (object₁), then, is not simply all of the past; it is the relevant past, and what the relevant past is, depends on the present. This brings us to two passages, in the first of which this relation is stressed and the connection between object₁ and object₂ made, and in the second of which that connection is clarified by a more precise statement of object₁:

"History, then, in both senses of the word – meaning both the inquiry conducted by the historian and the facts of the past into which he inquires – is a social process, in which individuals are engaged as social beings (...). The reciprocal process of interaction between the historian and his facts, what I have called the dialogue between present and past, is a dialogue not between abstract and isolated individuals, but between the society of today and the society of yesterday. (...) The past is intelligible to us only in the light

of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past. To enable man to understand the society of the past, and to increase his mastery over the society of the present, is the dual function of history.”³¹

Here, object₁ (‘the facts of the past’) is still rather vague. If we accept the concept of a fact, we will probably have to admit that there are simply too many facts to be able to say that ‘facts’ of the past, without further qualification, are what the historian studies. We have seen above that not all facts are relevant. The second passage provides at least some criterion of selection:

“Scientists, social scientists, and historians are all engaged in different branches of the same study: the study of man and his environment, of the effects of man on his environment and of his environment on man. The object of the study is the same: to increase man’s understanding of, and mastery over, his environment. (...) [H]istorian and physical scientist are united in the fundamental purpose of seeking to explain, and in the fundamental procedure of question and answer. The historian, like any other scientist, is an animal who incessantly asks the question ‘Why?’”³²

For Carr, then, object₁ is ‘the facts of the past’, in so far as they pertain to ‘man and his environment’ and ‘the effects of man on his environment and of his environment on man’.

Both passages are explicit about object₂, and in both we see the distinction between object_{2in} and object_{2ex} – in the first passage this comes under the heading of ‘the dual function of history’. The latter (object_{2ex}) is clear enough: ‘to increase [man’s] mastery over the society of the present’, or, in the second passage, ‘to increase man’s mastery over his environment’. The former (object_{2in}) is not as easily identifiable as it may seem to be at first sight. It is tempting to treat ‘to understand the society of the past’ and ‘to increase man’s understanding of his environment’ as being on a par with each other. There is an important difference, however. The second phrase omits any reference to the past. Carr’s assumption seems to be that an understanding of past societies and, presumably, of man’s relation to the environment of his day, will also increase our understanding of our present environment and our relation to it. But then the second phrase seems to occupy an intermediary position between the first and object_{2ex}. An understanding of past societies in relation to their environment leads to increased understanding of present societies in relation to their environment, which, for those societies, in turn leads to an enhanced mastery over themselves and their environment. Given that the phrase ‘to increase man’s understanding of his environment’ does not mention the past, it can hardly be seen as a goal intrinsic to the study of history, but should instead be taken as an extrinsic goal, necessary for the realization of what was already identified as object_{2ex}, namely ‘increased mastery’ over society and/or the environment.

With respect to object_{2in}, Carr also speaks of the ‘fundamental purpose of seeking to explain’. For Carr, understanding apparently entails explanation. To be able to answer the question ‘Why?’ is both to understand and to be able to explain.

The connection between object₁ and object_{2in} is clear: it makes sense to say that the study of past societies (in relation to their environment, as Carr intends) should have the intrinsic goal of coming to understand them and the ways they related to their environment. The connection between object₁ and object_{2ex} is equally strong, especially because of the intermediate extrinsic goal

2in

2ex

identified above. We can also see that the formulation of object₁ is already such as to allow an easy transition to object_{2ex}. Let us now turn to Elton's ideas on the subject.

3.2. G. R. Elton on 'the object of history'

Elton devotes the first part of *The Practice of History* to a discussion of the purpose of history (both in the sense of the study of the past and in the sense of the historical process). It is here that we find his clearest statements on 'the object of history', in all presently relevant senses. The first statement of interest regarding object₁ is the following:

"The study of history comprehends everything that men have said, thought, done or suffered. That much is commonplace, but also not quite true; some reservations have to be made. In the first place, not all the past is recoverable (...). (...) Historical study is not the study of the past but the study of present traces of the past (...)." ³³

Here, Elton makes his first approach to object₁: 'everything that men have said, thought, done or suffered'. In his qualification of this statement, however, he confuses object₁ with the sources – thus misinterpreting the question: "What does the historian study?" The study of history *uses* sources; in one sense of the word, it studies them. But they are not what the study of history is *concerned* with; they are not what it is *about*. We might say that we are looking for the intentional object of the study of history – and that is not in principle limited by the scarcity of sources, though they may block the study of this object in practice. Elton's mistake does not carry over to all the rest of his discussion. He continues as follows:

"Secondly, the definition given is in a way too wide because history is not the only form of enquiry which deals with man's past life. All the so-called social sciences (...) attend to man, and all of them can concern themselves with his past as well as his present. (...) We must therefore ask how history differs from other studies of man (...). The answer lies in three habits peculiar to history: its concern with events, its concern with change, and its concern with the particular." ³⁴

So, what object₁ is, is qualified by this statement, that history (as a science) is concerned with events, change, and the particular. Elton elaborates this point:

"History deals in events, not states; it investigates things that happen and not things that are." ³⁵

The historian, "if he is to understand historically and practise historical writing", "will have to concentrate on understanding change, which is the essential content of historical analysis and description." ³⁶

"History treats fundamentally of the transformation of things (people, institutions, ideas, and so on) from one state into another, and the event is its concern as well as its instrument." ³⁷

For Elton, object₁ is basically everything relating to man, seen as part of a process (or processes) of change, of transformation. The object of study is not something static, but something that is in flux. Hence, returning to his first statement of what the study of history is concerned with, Elton says:

“We can now rephrase the earlier definition of history. It is concerned with all those human sayings, thoughts, deeds and sufferings which occurred in the past and have left present deposit; and it deals with them from the point of view of happening, change, and the particular.”³⁸

Here, Elton’s earlier mistake slips in once again: ‘...and have left present deposit’. This ought to have been left out. If we ignore this confusion, we have a useful statement of object₁ that is in line with the previous quotations. It should be emphasized, in case the last passage has caused some confusion in this respect, that the aspect of change is very much *part* of object₁, and not something that is merely added by the historian’s perspective. Or, we might also say that object₁ includes a certain idea of the historian’s perspective – simply because what an object is, is defined by its subject, in the sense that what counts as an object depends on what counts as a subject (and the other way around). But this phrasing would probably reek too much of subjectivity and relativism for Elton, even if these are not necessarily implied.

A first statement regarding object_{2in} has already passed: the historian, Elton said, “will have to concentrate on understanding change”, change being essential to object₁. As in Carr’s case, then, object_{2in} is first of all *to understand*. Interpreting Elton’s statement in a somewhat more general fashion, we might say that for him, the intrinsic goal of the study of history is to understand object₁ – not at all an unreasonable suggestion, I would think.

As I said in the beginning of this subsection, Elton distinguishes between two meanings of ‘the purpose of history’. They are ‘the purpose of the historical process’ and ‘the purpose to be served by the historian in studying it’.³⁹ Only the second relates to object₂. He does not distinguish between an intrinsic and an extrinsic goal here. Elton clarifies his views on the purpose (goal, aim, end) of the study of history by opposing them to those of E. H. Carr and J. H. Plumb:

“...Mr Carr as well as Professor J. H. Plumb have recently entered eloquent pleas for a return to the allegedly discredited notion of progress, the notion that things get better in sum, however much the detail may get worse at times. They both want historians to write to this purpose because they seem to regard it as the scholar’s function not only to describe change but also to advocate it (...).”⁴⁰

Whereas Carr and Plumb, in Elton’s view, ‘seem to regard it as the scholar’s function not only to describe change but also to advocate it’, Elton himself wishes to remain on the value-free side, so to speak, by limiting himself to description. He does so, partly because he deems it impossible for us to discern a purpose in the process of history, so that there is nothing for historians to further, and partly because “[h]istorians who adhere to a belief in progress are always liable to lapse from description into approval” – or disapproval of course.⁴¹ In contrasting his own views with those of Carr and Plumb, then, Elton makes a shift from ‘understanding’ towards ‘description’ as the intrinsic goal of the study of history. The remainder of this part of the book, however, suggests that

he means more or less the same thing by these terms; to describe is not less than to understand, and to understand is not more than to describe, in the sense that it does not add a value judgement to it. Both terms are to denote professional neutrality. That entails that the historian should refrain from declaring any views on the overall purpose or pattern of the historical process: “[P]rogress and necessity are doctrines which cannot be derived from, can only be superimposed upon, the study history.”⁴² Such things are matters of interpretation, and the result of a subjective selection from the events of history. Elton then asks whether this means that “there is no very positive purpose in studying history, that it really is only a matter of the student’s private satisfaction?” And also: “Are there no standards by which one may call historians good or bad, adequate or inadequate, right or wrong?”⁴³ His answer is important in the context of this article:

“I think there are, but they cannot be discovered if the purpose of history is approached from outside the discipline itself. (...) We must first explain in what manner the past can truly be studied – that is, we must accept the despised tenet that the past must be studied for its own sake – and then enquire whether this study has any contribution to make to the present.”⁴⁴

This statement entails that there is, after all, a distinction between an intrinsic and an extrinsic goal of the study of history, and that the intrinsic goal is primary, and the extrinsic goal secondary, or derived. Elton explicates this as follows:

“[W]e are once again faced with the autonomy of history: the study of history is legitimate in itself, and any use of it for another purpose is secondary. That secondary use will be laudable or deplorable in proportion as the autonomous purpose has been served well or ill.”⁴⁵

There is a strong connection, then, between $\text{object}_{2\text{in}}$ and $\text{object}_{2\text{ex}}$. The latter can only be laudable to the extent that the former is accomplished. Elton is clearly thinking of the possibility of the abuse of history for political purposes, for example in the form of propaganda. In his view, such abuse can only occur if the historian did not do his job (as historian) well; that is, if he did not accomplish $\text{object}_{2\text{in}}$. The intrinsic goal of the study of history is to acquire as adequate an understanding of the past, and to give as faithful a representation of the past, as the evidence allows. The latter is what it means to write good history. Against Carr, who emphasizes the dialogue between the present and the past, Elton says:

“The task of history is to understand the past, and if the past is to be understood it must be given full respect in its own right. And unless it is properly understood, any use of it in the present must be suspect and can be dangerous.”⁴⁶

Once more Elton emphasizes that $\text{object}_{2\text{in}}$ is to understand the past, which implies value-neutrality. The historian is only concerned with the present “in so far as it throws light on the part of the past he is studying. It is the cardinal error to reverse this process and study the past for the light it throws on the present.”⁴⁷

Then follow a number of considerations regarding $\text{object}_{2\text{in}}$ and $\text{object}_{2\text{ex}}$, in which it becomes clear to what extent these are connected – sometimes even overlapping – for Elton. Immediately

after the last quotation I gave, Elton says:

“However, it does not in the least follow from this that the study of history, treated as autonomous and justified within itself, has no contribution to make beyond its frontiers. In the first place, let it be remembered that this pursuit of history in its own right is not only morally just but also agreeable. A good many people simply want to know about the past, for emotional or intellectual satisfaction, and the professional historian fulfils a useful ‘social’ function when he helps them know better. He is also, of course, satisfying his own desire for knowledge (...) This might be supposed to reduce the historian to a mere entertainer, but in fact it gives him a cultural role: he contributes to a complex of non-practical activities which make up the culture of a society. (...) When he stimulates and satisfies the imagination he does not differ essentially from the poet or artist (...). There is an emotional satisfaction of a high order to be gained from extending the comprehending intelligence to include the past.”⁴⁸

Without blurring the distinction between $\text{object}_{2\text{in}}$ and $\text{object}_{2\text{ex}}$, Elton points out that the attainment of the former, that is, the realization of the intrinsic goal of the study of history, is ‘also agreeable’. Hence, it serves an extrinsic purpose as well. This $\text{object}_{2\text{ex}}$ can only be attained through $\text{object}_{2\text{in}}$. Elton gives various names to this extrinsic goal: ‘emotional or intellectual satisfaction’, ‘contributing to culture’, ‘stimulating and satisfying the imagination’. The first can also be reached by amateurs who have undertaken the study of history; the other two are mainly reserved for the professional historian.

But next to this ‘emotional’ goal, there is another (‘practical’) extrinsic goal:

“Next, it would certainly be untrue to suppose that history can teach no practical lessons. (...) [A] sound acquaintance with the prehistory of a situation or problem does illumine them and does assist in making present decisions; and though history cannot prophecy, it can make reasonable predictions. Historical knowledge gives solidity to the understanding of the present and may suggest guiding lines for the future.”⁴⁹

As in the case of the first extrinsic goal, the success in reaching this extrinsic goal depends on the degree in which the intrinsic goal is attained. If one’s understanding of the past is inadequate, it will be difficult and risky to abstract practical lessons from it, not to speak of making predictions for the future on its basis.

Elton then sets out to qualify the above statements:

“Yet these emotional and practical uses of history are not its main contribution to the purpose of man. The study of history is an intellectual pursuit, an activity of the reasoning mind, and, as one should expect, its main service lies in its essence. Like all sciences, history, to be worthy of itself and beyond itself, must concentrate on one thing: the search for truth.”⁵⁰

Surprisingly, all of a sudden there appears to be something like ‘the purpose of man’. After all his criticism of ideas regarding an overall purpose of or direction in history, Elton feels no scruples

speaking of ‘the purpose of man’ – the latter apparently being a much less debatable matter than the former. The explanation for this seeming incongruity will be discussed in the following subsection. What is most relevant here is that in the above passage, the main object_{2ex} turns out to lie *in* object_{2in}. The primary extrinsic goal of the study of history lies in ‘its essence’ as ‘an intellectual pursuit’: ‘the search for truth’. Again, this does not dissolve the distinction between an extrinsic and an intrinsic goal. It merely means that the extrinsic goal can only be reached by focusing on the intrinsic goal, the way fun can only be had by doing *something* that is ‘fun’ to do. ‘The search for truth’ is the statement of both object_{2in} and object_{2ex} (though in the first case it concerns only the truth about the past); hence ‘to be worthy of *itself* and *beyond itself*’. Elton’s final statement on the subject is the following:

“Its real value as a social activity lies in the training it provides, the standards it sets, in this singularly human concern. Reason distinguishes man from the rest of creation, and the study of history justifies itself in so far as it assists reason to work and improve itself. Like all rational activities, the study of history, regarded as an autonomous enterprise, contributes to the improvement of man, and it does so by seeking the truth within the confines of its particular province, which happens to be the rational reconstruction of the past.”⁵¹

The real practical goal or purpose of history (providing training and setting standards for the search for truth) is subservient to the primary extrinsic goal of the study of history, which coincides with the intrinsic goal of the study of history. Of a further extrinsic goal, ‘the improvement of man’, it is unclear whether this is to be achieved *through* the attainment of truth, or whether the latter is instrumental to the former, i.e. whether the former is something apart from the attainment of truth.

To sum up: object₁, for Elton, is the events and transformative processes of the past in so far as these consist in or relate to human action, thought and feeling. Object_{2in} is, concretely, to describe and understand these events and changes to the extent that the evidence allows. More abstractly, object_{2in} is the search for and the attainment of truth (regarding the past). This is also the primary object_{2ex} of the study of history, and beyond that, object_{2ex} is ‘the improvement of man’. Finally, there are practical and emotional goals. The main practical goal lies in the provision of training and the setting of standards for the search for truth. A further practical object_{2ex} is to draw practical lessons from history. Emotional goals are ‘emotional and intellectual satisfaction’, ‘contributing to culture’, and ‘stimulating and satisfying the imagination’.

3.3. Carr and Elton compared Now that we have an idea, for both authors, of what they regard as object₁, object_{2in} and object_{2ex} of the study of history, it should be possible to compare their views. At first glance it seems that, despite Elton’s polemical tone and his use of the method of contrast in expounding his views, Carr and Elton are not that far apart at all. Though Carr places more emphasis on action, stressing ‘mastery’ over society and environment, and though Elton lays more stress on the processual character of the object of study (which is not at all at odds with Carr’s view of history), they have similar views regarding the intrinsic goal of the study of history. Moreover, both turn out to be equally moved by the idea of progress, though Carr looks for it in mastery over society and the environment, and Elton (more vaguely) in the improvement of man through the search for truth. It is quite remarkable, after all Elton’s criticism of the presence and influence of the idea of progress in Carr’s work, to see that in the end Elton sings a similar song.

And yet there is an important difference. This is partly revealed in the fact that Elton phrases object_{2in} not only in terms of understanding, but also in terms of description. This is related to Elton's critique of the idea of progress. For another part, it shows itself in the difference between Carr's statement of object_{2ex} and Elton's own idea of 'the improvement of man', which fits the discourse of progress equally well. The difference centres around the concept of 'objectivity'.

For Carr, 'objectivity' is not the same everywhere and always. Instead, it depends on a relation to a subject: "The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context."⁵² Carr states clearly that "the social sciences as a whole, since they involve man as both subject and object, (...) are incompatible with any theory of knowledge which pronounces a rigid divorce between subject and object."⁵³ Though it is certainly not the historian's job to pronounce moral judgement on people from the past, it is inevitable that moral judgement is inherent in what the historian writes. This does not presuppose a 'superhistorical standard of value', though.⁵⁴ Moral concepts acquire substance in their historical context; hence, the substance changes throughout history. Objectivity, for Carr, can only lie in the historian's understanding of his necessary lack of it. The more objective historian is the one who understands himself as a partner in a dialogue between present and past, "the historian who penetrates most deeply into this reciprocal process".⁵⁵ Herein lies the possibility of progress: in a deeper understanding of the relationship between present and past, *and* in a projection of one's vision of the historical process into the future. These are the two meanings of the objectivity of historians:

"First of all, we mean that he has a capacity to rise above the limited vision of his own situation in society and history – a capacity which (...) is partly dependent on his capacity to recognize the extent of his involvement in that situation (...). Secondly, we mean that he has the capacity to project his vision into the future in such a way as to give him a more profound and more lasting insight into the past than can be attained by those historians whose outlook is entirely bounded by their own immediate situation."⁵⁶

Elton could not disagree more. For him, objectivity means neutrality. This means, first of all, that the historian should not pronounce moral judgement on the past. It means, secondly, that the historian should refrain from making any statement on the overall purpose or pattern of the past – it is beyond his competence to know this. Elton discusses the idea that history is a less 'hard' science than the natural sciences, due to the fact that in history, there is no equivalent for the repeatable experiment, and thus no possibility of verification or falsification by such means. His reply is that this gives history a greater objectivity, in the sense that whereas natural scientists construct (in their laboratories) the reality they study, historians have to conform to an objective, unalterable reality, that they did not construct.⁵⁷ Indeed, "[t]he historian cannot verify; he can only discover and explain".⁵⁸ After he has made his initial choice of his area of study, "he becomes the servant of his evidence" and "opens his mind to the evidence both passively (listening) and actively (asking)".⁵⁹ The questions the mind comes up with are "suggested by the evidence".⁶⁰ The 'proper practice of scholarship and research' drastically reduce the effect of the historian's lack of knowledge, subjectivity, and fallibility; his method "reduces the effects of human frailty and creates a formidable foundation of certainty beneath the errors and disputes which will never cease".⁶¹ It is

exactly because Elton has this very different idea of objectivity than Carr has, that he can come up with his idea of ‘the improvement of man’. This is not inconsistent with what Elton takes to be the proper historical attitude; on the contrary, both for the writing of history and for the improvement of man there are universal, objective criteria. Behind Elton’s work is an idea of a fixed, universal truth – a truth about man and a truth about history. His position is in this respect diametrically opposed to Carr’s, with his idea of a progressive (in two senses) criterion of truth.

What does this mean for both men’s views on ‘the object of history’? It does not mean that the statements of the various kinds of object of history themselves change. But while they remain the same, our understanding of them changes. Carr’s object₁ is something that moves along, as it were, with the historian, as time passes. They are both part of the ‘historical procession’. That means that the historian does not simply try to find out how things once were regarding man in relation to his environment, where these terms have fixed meanings. Historians in different times understand ‘man’, ‘environment’ and the relation between them differently, depending on their own perspective in time. In a sense, they do not study the same thing as previous historians, even if the abstract statement of object₁ remains the same. Object_{2in} and object_{2ex} are similarly coloured by Carr’s idea of history as an ‘unending dialogue between present and past’. The connections between the object of study and the goals of the study of history, and between the intrinsic and the extrinsic goal, are all constituted by Carr’s view of history as a moving (progressive) process, in which both subject and object (in both senses) have their place. For Elton, what is the object of study for historians now will be their object of study in the future. Historians find out the truth about the past, in so far as the evidence allows; the study of history is a cumulative process of truth-gathering. This practice has its main value in itself, and this value is not dependent on variable circumstances or standards. Hence, the connections between object₁ and object₂, and within the latter between object_{2in} and object_{2ex}, are governed by an unchanging criterion of objectivity.

Positivism and progress were once thought to be two sides of the same coin.⁶² Seeing the difference between Carr and Elton, it turns out to be possible to divorce these two notions. Carr denounces positivism, but believes in progress; Elton, though he borrows from the discourse of progress, denounces the idea, and he does so as a result of an attitude that can only be called positivist. Elton’s understanding of object_{2in} does not allow a belief in progress (‘the notion that things get better in sum’), because the latter entails a value judgement concerning the past; as objective truth-finding, it does allow ‘the improvement of man’. Carr does not believe in such a separation between object(ivity) and subject(ivity), and herein lies the reason that there can always be progress: as man’s understanding of his environment changes, so also what constitutes mastery over it.

4. The historian as subject of the object(s) of history

What any historian sees as object₁ and object_{2in} may depend on the object_{2ex} he has in view, or vice versa. This raises the question whether there can ever be a ‘pure’ intrinsic goal of the study of history, untainted, so to speak, by considerations of extrinsic utility of some kind. If not, the next question is whether this jeopardizes the reliability and the legitimacy of historical research. The answer to the first question is: no, we will never find a ‘pure’ intrinsic goal of the study of history. Intrinsic and extrinsic goals will in practice always be mixed to a certain extent – which, however, does not vitiate the usefulness of distinguishing between the two, if only because this may prevent them from becoming entangled to an unacceptable degree.⁶³ As to the next question, it does not

seem to me that historical research is generally unreliable, or that the study of history is a discipline without legitimacy. Object_{2in} should not be dominated by object_{2ex}, but that is not the same as demanding purity. Besides, one can imagine a ‘pure’ object_{2in} – pure because there is no object_{2ex} – without this resulting in an epistemologically reliable historical practice. Say, for instance, that some historian sees no extrinsic goal for what he does whatsoever; he practices *l’histoire pour l’histoire*; how does this guarantee that he goes about his job properly?

Moreover, it seems that such an historian would be unable to do anything at all, for how would he select his material? Without entering relativistic waters, we can admit that history (the past) does not select itself for us. Selection (or: importance) depends on interest, on a perspective.⁶⁴ Hence the object(s) of history depend(s) on the subject of history, by which I here mean the historian. The dependency is twofold: first of all, the meaning given to ‘object₁’, ‘object_{2in}’, and ‘object_{2ex}’ depends on the subject (the historian); he defines the object of study, as well as the goals of the study of history (though often not in a reflectively conscious act). Secondly, the subject determines (or at least may determine) object₁ and object_{2in} *through* object_{2ex}. It is most interesting to analyze the relation between the historian and what he takes to be the various objects of history when he starts out at this end, that is, from an extrinsic goal.

That the object(s) of history depend(s) on their subject is not just evident from the differences between individual historians working in the same period, but also from historical trends in historiography. The subject (in a broader sense) changes with the time; his convictions and preoccupations change with social, political, economical circumstances. New kinds of historiography, even if they replace older ones, do not generally do so because the former were unreliable; nor do they constitute a step back in reliability. They mirror changes in the subject, changes in interest; if older historiography is condemned, it is generally for its one-sidedness. A new subject of history means a change of aspect.

However dependent on the subject (his religion, his political beliefs, his anthropology, et cetera) the objects of history may be, there are limits to what anyone can define as the object of study of the science of history, or the intrinsic goal of the study of history. There is not just one correct way of practicing history, but there are limits to how one can define object₁ and object_{2in}, if the practice is still to be recognized or considered as scientific history. Within these limits, epistemological reliability (which is something very different from ‘complete truth’) may be attained in different ways. The past can be viewed under different aspects, which means that there is room for different understandings of object₁ and object_{2in} (and hence of object_{2ex}). That different historians subscribe to different views of object₁, object_{2in}, and object_{2ex} does not lead to sheer relativism. What it *does* mean, is that historians should try to be explicit about their understanding of the object(s) of history.⁶⁵

5. Evaluation

I have distinguished between various meanings of ‘the object of history’: object₁ is the object of study, object_{2in} the intrinsic goal of the study of history, and object_{2ex} the extrinsic goal of the same. What have we gained by the explication of this distinction? It seems to me that the gain is a valuable analytical tool – provided it be used correctly. It is a valuable tool, because it highlights the inevitable connections between what an historian takes to be his or her object of study, and what

he or she takes to be the goal (intrinsic as well as extrinsic) of the study of history. In some cases, it will be possible to point out what the historian's point of departure was; in other words, to say whether his or her view of object₁ was mainly formed under the influence of his idea of object₂, or the other way around. It might be that in Collingwood's case, the former holds true, but I dare not positively confirm this. In other cases (as with Carr and Elton) the two will go together. On the level of individual historians, especially where object_{2ex} is dominant, it would be interesting to expand the analysis of 'the object(s) of history' with one of 'the subject(s) of history'. Such an analysis will generally be informative from a comparative historiographical perspective.

The provision that the analytical tool be used correctly is meant as a warning that statements of the object of history (in whatever sense) cannot simply be taken at face value. We have seen in the case of Carr and Elton that this can give the impression that people who differ profoundly on certain issues are actually more or less in agreement on them. So a correct application of the analytical tool I have provided here entails a close reading of authors, in which one tries not only to find those authors' statements on the object of history, but also to understand them in the broader context of their theoretical positions.

Finally, it seems valuable to explicate the different meanings of 'the object of history' I have distinguished between, simply because it makes explicit what often remains implicit in the work of historians. It cannot but be of value to historians if they articulate their own views about the object of history in its various senses, and come to see the connections between them.

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Notes

1. I should add that 'the study of history' need not necessarily be the study of history by professional historians; I do take it to imply a certain level of professionalism.
2. One regularly encounters both uses of the term 'object', but it happens just as often that the term is not used at all, and that other words are used to convey both meanings. As to the authors discussed in this article: Collingwood uses the term 'object' for object₁, Carr (at least once) for object₂, and Elton, I believe, does not use the term in either sense.
3. I say 'tend to', because it is not necessarily the case. They can be incompatible, in which case there is something wrong, or they can be merely compatible, without there being a strong relation between the two. In the latter case, however, the one kind of object still poses limits for what the other kind of object may be.
4. Object₁ is often implicit in the definition of object_{2in}, but it would be a mistake not to distinguish between the two. Firstly, the same object₁ may be combined with different intrinsic goals of the study of history. For example, when object₁ is taken to be 'past actions (of human beings)', object_{2in} may be to describe these actions, to explain them, to construct an intelligible narrative around them, or something else, or a combination of such things. When we know what an historian's object₁ is, we do not yet know anything about object_{2in}. The other way around, things

are a bit different. If an historian gives us a full statement of what he sees as object_{2in}, this includes object₁. However, such complete statements are seldom given. It is more common to find isolated statements of object_{2in}, without explicit reference to object₁. For instance, an historian might say that history is concerned with explanation (as opposed to description), or perhaps with representation (as opposed to both explanation and description), while stating somewhere else that it is concerned with past actions of human beings – thus divorcing object₁ and object_{2in} from each other, even while the former is implicit in the latter. Secondly, to say what one takes to be object₁ is simply an answer to a different question than to explain what one sees as object_{2in}. An historian, if asked what it is that he studies, may answer that question (initially, at least) without reference to object_{2in}. Thirdly, it is possible that object_{2in} and object₁ are inconsistently defined by some historian. In case of such incompatibility, it is useful to be able to distinguish between both kinds of object.

5. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986 [1946].

6. Stein Helgeby, *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R. G. Collingwood*, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2004, 7.

7. Collingwood, 9.

8. Ibid., 10.

9. Ibid., 213.

10. Idem.

11. Ibid., 115.

12. Ibid., 215. See also 39 and 97.

13. Ibid., 217.

14. It may be that for Collingwood ‘to know what man has done’ and ‘to know what man is’ do not *completely* amount to the same knowledge, that their overlap is incomplete. For Collingwood says that “knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done.” There is a difference in meaning between ‘what man has tried’ and ‘what man could try’, between ‘what man has done’, and ‘what man can do’; whether there is a factual difference, the future will have to tell. As yet, we do not know whether man *can* do anything he has not already done – assuming we are not talking about the possibilities of technology and other such matters. Furthermore, Collingwood’s own ideas about the logic of question and answer suggest that ‘to know what man has done’ and ‘to know what man is’ are different in the sense that imply (or at least can do so) answers to different questions. (See especially R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, chapter V.)

15. Ibid., 323-324.

16. Ibid., 324.
17. Ibid., 325.
18. Ibid., 326.
19. Ibid., 329.
20. As to moral progress, see Helgeby, 205: “As our conceptions of choice and action develop and become more self-conscious, our acts and answers become more adequate to our problems. We can articulate more adequately the choices we face. We answer our questions with acts that we choose from reason, rather than capriciously. Our decisions can be made from duty rather than mere utility or right.”
21. Collingwood, 333.
22. Idem. Concerning self-knowledge, see also Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, chapter X.
23. Ibid., 334.
24. Helgeby, 219.
25. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* , Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1990 (ed. by R. W. Davies).
26. David Bebbington, for instance, prefers the latter distinction. David Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1979, 141.
27. Carr, 30.
28. Ibid., 36.
29. Ibid., 75.
30. Idem.
31. Ibid., 55.
32. Ibid., 86.
33. Elton, 20.
34. Ibid., 21.
35. Ibid., 22.
36. Idem.
37. Ibid., 22-23.

38. Ibid., 24.

39. Ibid., 56.

40. Ibid., 58.

41. Ibid., 62.

42. Ibid., 64.

43. Ibid., 65.

44. Idem.

45. Ibid., 66.

46. Idem.

47. Idem.

48. Ibid., 66-67.

49. Ibid., 67.

50. Ibid., 67-68.

51. Ibid., 68.

52. Carr, 11.

53. Ibid., 73.

54. Ibid., 82.

55. Ibid., 131.

56. Ibid., 123.

57. Elton, 72-73.

58. Ibid., 74.

59. Ibid., 83.

60. Ibid., 60.

61. Ibid., 84-85.

62. I understand 'positivism' here as an approach to science that seeks to impose what are seen as

the methods of the natural sciences on science in general, that stresses ‘objectivity’, the ‘fact’ that science deals with ‘facts’, and so on. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the thought that science in this sense would bring progress (this being a cumulative knowledge and understanding of the external world *and* of man itself, leading to a greater – technological – control over and a decreased dependency on the world, greater material well-being, et cetera) was still widespread.

63. I cannot go into the question what would constitute an ‘unacceptable degree’ here, but it seems to me that we can often tell when an extrinsic goal has dominated the intrinsic goal; this usually means (as Elton would also say) that the intrinsic goal is in fact not reached. No true understanding, no adequate description, or whatever was taken to be the intrinsic goal of the study of history, will have been accomplished.

64. For Whitehead, importance and interest were two sides of the same coin; see Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, The Free Press (Macmillan), New York, 1968 (1938), 8.

65. Collingwood was quite explicit about this, and using his autobiography – for the sake of convenience assuming its reliability – I can very briefly illustrate the relation between the subject and objects of history. For Collingwood, object₁ was *res gestae*, actions of human beings in the past, but only insofar as they were *actions*. He was concerned with the *inside* of these events, that is: with thought. The historian tries to discover past thought, to think what historical actors thought – this is the only way to understand them. To do so constitutes object_{2in}. The extrinsic goal of history, finally, was to bring about progress through human self-knowledge. Historians nowadays would probably place less emphasis on ‘thought’ than Collingwood did, but in his autobiography he shows that the preoccupation with thought, with understanding other minds, was there from early childhood on. He describes the discovery, as a nine-year-old, of a seventeenth-century book (perhaps Descartes’ *Principia*) as the first lesson in ‘the history of thought’ (Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 1). His ‘logic of question and answer’, the basis of Collingwood’s hermeneutics, goes back (to Collingwood’s mind, anyway) to his parents’ artistic painting. He “learned to think of a picture not as a finished product exposed for the admiration of virtuosi, but as the visible record, lying about the house, of an attempt to solve a definite problem in painting” (2). This way of thinking was later stimulated by his archaeological fieldwork (23ff.). This ‘bent of mind’ and his views about the difference between human actions and ‘mere’ events (as studied by the natural sciences), led him to think of history as concerned with ‘purposive activity’, and finally as the ‘self-knowledge of mind’ (109, 114-115).